

Chapter Twenty-nine

Bald Head Island is not New York City. It is about as un-New York as it can be. A beautiful small isle with fourteen miles of delightful beaches, it's a developer's dream.

It's located in North Carolina at the confluence of the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean. It's accessible only by ferry or private boat. Bald Head Lighthouse, also known as Old Baldy or the Cape Fear Light, is the most prominent feature on the landscape. The original structure was built in 1794. The Frying Pan Shoals, a collection of shifting sandbars covered by a thin layer of water, extend twenty-eight miles from the southeast end of the island. Early sailors dubbed the area Cape Fear for good reason. More than a few mariners lost their ships and their lives on the shoals.

Half the island is a nature preserve, including a picturesque maritime forest, primarily oak trees but including wild olive, yaupon and American holly. Deer, squirrels, raccoons and gray foxes abound.

The island has a year round population of a couple of hundred souls. In the summer time, that number often swells to a couple thousand, attracted by the reasonable resort rates and the absolute loveliness of the place. This year, 'The First Annual Bald Head Island Fish Fry Festival' was expected to draw close to five thousand people on Thanksgiving weekend. The celebration was the brainchild of Johnson Gounod, a local developer, and in truth he was the only one expecting five thousand people to show up. Many of the islanders hoped no one would come. They liked the laid back, remote-from-the-rest-of-the-world lifestyle they had paid for when they had purchased property there. Gounod, on the other hand, saw that attitude as counter productive to his ambition to

make a lot of money. He had been working for over ten months to promote the festival, which would probably make or break him as a businessman. He had been struggling, mostly unsuccessfully, with the land developers' art of modern alchemy, turning dirt into gold.

He was actually an interloper of sorts and was not accepted into the coterie of other Bald Head realtors. The principal developers of the Island had done quite well in attracting buyers. Gounod had not, mainly because he was slightly...well, stupid. When his mother had died two years before, he had taken the proceeds of her bequest and invested in thirty parcels of land and a three-unit condo building on the island. He would have been better off putting his money in a CD at 1%. The fault lay not in his offerings, but in his offering. He could not be considered the world's worst salesman, only because no contest exists which would certify him as such.

Gounod hoped that this latest scheme, staging a holiday event, would prove to be the turning point in making Bald Head the 'in' place to be. Actually, though he didn't realize it, it already was. It was his thirty subdivision lots that were not 'in.' No ocean views, but lots of bog views. Mosquitoes and no-seeums loved his lots above all others on the island. He thought that if enough people could just see the place, they would be as enraptured as he was. He had believed one of the problems he faced was the inaccessibility by automobile of the island. He figured that in a mobile society, leaving your car on the mainland and riding a ferryboat to your hometown was a real bump in the road. He had just wasted a year of his spare time trying to convince his congressman to earmark funds for a bridge over the Cape Fear River from the mainland to Bald Head. After all, he had complained, they did it in Alaska, building a 'bridge to nowhere.'

Representative Bobby Slidelle was thought by some to be only two steps up from being an idiot, but even he was too smart to try to slip that one into the budget. The permanent residents of the place took a very dim view of the proposed bridge project. It is a village ordinance that no internal combustion vehicles be allowed on the island other than those used by the police and fire departments. Transportation is primarily by golf cart. Gounod had plowed ahead, expressing his belief that when a bridge would be built the islanders would change their minds and allow cars. This was not good thinking. The locals' unhappiness with Gounod's proposal eventually translated to discontent with Johnson Gounod himself. He was not a popular figure.

Today Gounod was working on signing a contract with 'The Catalytic Converters Zoom Band' to appear in concert at his festival. They wanted three thousand dollars to play. He was willing to spring for five hundred. They settled on fifteen hundred and a free night in one of his condos. They agreed to play from two until ten p.m., with fifteen minute breaks every hour. His other big expense had been to rent battery-powered tram cars to haul people from the ferry slip to the festival site, with a built-in detour that would take them past his lots. His desire to achieve big shot status on the island had overridden any small bit of business sense he may have been able to summon to the project. Too bad Gounod had never heard of Robert Burns. It might have saved him from his own foolishness. Burns advice to us all: *"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us, to see oursel's as others see us! It wad frae monie a blunder free us, and foolish notion."*

Meanwhile, at the Bald Head Island Marina, David Martin, a/k/a Karim al-Hadji was guiding his forty-three foot Carver motor cruiser into dock space number twelve. He was single-handing the boat and had prepared for docking while still outside the marina.

This meant that fore and aft lines had been draped over the side so that the marina dockhands could grab them and secure them to the dock cleats. White rubber fenders swung loosely on the starboard side, where the dock would be. As he drifted toward the allotted spot he reversed the twin Cummins diesels and brought the forward movement to a halt. The boat nestled perfectly alongside the dock.

After the Carver was secured to the wooden floating pier, Karim cut the engines and shouted thanks to the helpers. He stepped off the stern onto the weathered planks and hooked up the boat's yellow power cable to a dockside shore power junction box.

Before reboarding, Karim went to the marina office and checked in.

The attendant asked, "How long do you plan to be with us, Mr. Martin?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a couple of months. Could be longer. I'm thinking about starting a new business over in Southport. I'll give you a check for a month in advance."

"That will be fine. And what is the name of your boat?"

"It's *Cash Float*."

"That's funny. You a banker or something?"

Karim smiled enigmatically. "Yes, something. By the way, is the electricity metered?"

"Yeah. I'll have one of my guys read the meter in a little while. Let us know if you need anything."

Karim said, "Do you have a calendar of events for the next couple of months?"

"Sure do. Take this one. It's free."

"Thank you. I will let you know if there is anything else."

Back on board, Karim sat at the navigation station desk. He had an open copy of a book, Nelson Demille's "*Up Country*," laid out. He spent a half-hour flipping the pages back and forth, writing a series of numbers separated by commas. He was preparing a classic book-code message, each number designating a page or a letter on that page. Virtually unbreakable unless you know the book being used and you have an identical copy. With millions of books in print, the chance of someone else deciphering was slim to none. After completing the communication, he accessed bancodehondurasjg.com and clicked on 'Contact us'. He copied the entire text into the comment section in the e-mail and sent it.

This communiqué was to the point. "*On the island. Will establish storage facilities in Southport, a nearby village. It seems that Thanksgiving Day is going to be a good time to attack. There will be a celebration on the beach and many people are expected. Plan developing. More soon.*"

E-mail the author: mcdougal8@verizon.net